

Overview

Education, Training, and Services for Individuals with Disabilities

This overview describes the Department's programs for adults who need special training or services to learn or to work in the labor market or to live independently. These programs are coordinated by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services through the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA).

For the past 76 years, a variety of programs and providers have given services and job training to individuals with disabilities who want to work or whose severe disability makes gainful employment extremely difficult, but for whom independent living goals are feasible. The Rehabilitation Act authorizes 15 programs for these purposes, the largest of which is the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) State Grants Program. In FY 1996, the VR State Grants Program provided \$2.1 billion worth of services, technology, and training through 82 designated state VR agencies to help prepare persons with disabilities for employment. In addition to the Rehabilitation Act, several other laws authorize programs for persons who are blind or deaf, and for technological assistance for persons with disabilities.

I. VR State Grants Program

VR services are provided in accordance with each person's needs, abilities, priorities, resources, and informed choices so that the person may prepare for gainful employment. If a state VR agency is unable to serve all eligible persons with the funds available, it must establish an order of selection for services, first serving those with the most severe disabilities, then those with severe disabilities, and only then those with nonsevere disabilities.

State agencies coordinate the provision of VR services either through one agency to serve all individuals with disabilities, or through a general agency and a separate agency for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. VR counselors work with the individuals to set their own goals and to make a plan to meet those goals. Some people use VR funds to purchase services from local providers such as community-based rehabilitation programs, traditional rehabilitation facilities such as those run by the local affiliates of national organizations, hospitals, physicians, colleges, and technical schools. Federal funds are distributed to states by formula, with each state providing a matching share of 21.3 percent.

Since it began operating in 1921, the VR program has rehabilitated 9.2 million people. In FY 1996 state agencies served about 1,225,000 people, a 30 percent increase from FY 1992, the year before changes in the Rehabilitation Act increased eligibility. Changes in the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 had shifted the emphasis to serving people with severe disabilities, and the yearly total of persons with employment outcomes consequently dropped from 361,138 in 1974 to 191,890 in 1992. The number has since climbed again, to 213,334 in FY 1996, although the rehabilitation rate (the proportion of all individuals who received services and who obtained an employment outcome) gradually decreased from 68.3 percent in 1989 to 60.4 percent in FY 1995. At the same time, the proportion of individuals with severe disabilities who obtained an employment outcome climbed from 69.7 percent in FY 1992 to 77.6 percent in FY 1996.

About half of VR recipients are between the ages of 25 and 44, and about 40 percent either have orthopedic impairments or suffer from mental illness. More than half receive diagnostic and evaluation services, 27 percent receive training, 18 percent each receive restoration services and another 17 percent receive transportation services. Fewer than 17 percent support themselves prior to applying for

VR services; the average weekly wage for an individual who obtained employment in FY 1995 after receiving services was \$215, an increase of \$173 over earnings at the time of application. The proportion of people with any earned income rose from 22 percent at the time of application to 92 percent at closure. The average cost of services provided to these people was \$3,201. More than half found jobs in the industrial or service sectors. The chart at the end of this overview highlights some of the characteristics of VR recipients, the services they receive, and their employment outcomes.

II. Other RSA Programs

RSA also oversees a number of smaller programs targeted at specific populations or specific needs. There are separate programs specifically designed to serve migratory agricultural workers and seasonal farm workers with disabilities and their families and American Indians living on reservations, although both populations can also receive services from the State Grants Program. Many small demonstration projects serve special disability populations, and a number of ongoing demonstration projects were designed to heighten people's choice in the rehabilitation process.

Three independent living programs provide nonvocational services for individuals who have disabilities that make gainful employment extremely difficult but for whom independent living goals are reasonable. The Centers for Independent Living program provides services through consumer-controlled, community-based, cross-disability, nonresidential, private, nonprofit agencies operated by individuals with significant disabilities to foster a philosophy of independent living. The program for older blind individuals provides services to help correct blindness or visual impairment, and to help people adjust to blindness by becoming better able to care for individual needs. The program also offers Braille instruction, reader services, transportation, and orientation and mobility services.

Other RSA programs assist and protect people with disabilities, train VR personnel, work closely with industry to find jobs for individuals with disabilities, or concentrate on providing supported employment for individuals with the most severe disabilities. Through these and other programs, RSA provides a range of services to meet the employment and independent living goals of individuals with disabilities in all communities.

Chart 1. Characteristics and Service of VR Recipients Whose Cases Closed in FY 1995	
Age at application (avg=33.8 years)	
under 20	16.3%
20-24	12.0
25-34	27.0
35-44	25.5
45-54	2.9
55 and over	6.3

Chart 1. Characteristics and Service of VR Recipients Whose Cases Closed in FY 1995	
Major Disabling Conditions	
Orthopedic impairment	21.1%
Mental illness	19.5
Substance abuse	11.2
All other conditions	10.9
Mental retardation	9.5
Learning disabilities	7.9
Visual impairments	5.6
Hearing impairments	4.4
Primary Source of Income at Application	
Family and friends	41.9%
Public assistance (federal & nonfederal)	17.5
Self	16.6
SSDI benefits	7.4
Other sources	11.3
Type of Services Provided	
Diagnostic and evaluation	55.3%
Training	27.0
Restoration	17.7
Transportation	17.3
Job referral	16.3
Other services	15.5
Job placement	12.7
Maintenance	10.6
Occupations at Closure for Rehabilitants	
Industrial	26.4%
Service	25.0
Professional	15.6
Clerical	14.0
Homemaking	7.6
Sales	6.0
Agricultural	2.3

Source: RSA case service report system.